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## **Complementarity in Romantic Relationships: Constructs Involved in Individual and Partner Change**

The purpose of the current research was to investigate complementarity vs. similarity in romantic partners, as well as changes in partners' life skill levels over time. It was predicted that individuals would be more complementary to each other than similar, that they would be more likely to improve their weaknesses if they were high in Type A personality and growth, and if they perceived that their partners wanted them to improve. Surprisingly, none of these hypotheses were supported. However, improvement on life skills was positively correlated with both relationship duration and relationship satisfaction. Implications and future research possibilities are discussed.

It has long been debated whether similarity or complementarity predicts attraction, relationship satisfaction, longevity, and happiness in romantic couples. Throughout the years, similarity has won the debate. Many studies have found that similar beliefs and personalities between partners will decrease the amount of conflicts and increase the amount of satisfaction partners feel in relationships (Baxter & West, 2003). Other studies found that partners who are similar are often better adjusted in their marriages (Aube & Koestner, 1995; Spanier, 1976).

It is the purpose of this research to determine whether happy couples can be similar and dissimilar in many different aspects of their lives. Studies have found that one reason why personality traits are

relatively stable over time is because people surround themselves with similar others as one way of reaffirming the traits they already possess. Individuals may be especially motivated to find a life partner who is similar to themselves, because this may be the most influential person in their social network (Buss, 1984). However, further research is needed to explore how complementarity might reach the same stability goal. It is possible that having complementary skills in life will actually make two individuals a "unit" or "team" which will bond the couple closer together, just like similarity does in personality theory. In short, happy couples may have similar personality traits, but they may also have complementary life skills.

Past research has studied the phenomenon that occurs between couples as they become more similar over time. For example, an individual who has a weakness in such areas as word fluency or verbal meaning will improve this skill if his or her partner is strong in it (Gruber-Baldini, Schaie, & Willis, 1995). However, this finding of becoming more similar over time implies that at the beginning of the relationship, the two partners were dissimilar.

More recently, Baxter and West (2003) gave couples a tape-recorder and asked them to discuss if they felt they were similar or different on six topics: personality, leisure pursuits, attitudes, beliefs, communication style, and demographic/family background. They were then asked to talk about how positive or negative each similarity or difference was. The researchers found that many topics were considered to be both negative and positive. Most of those couples who rated differences as positive said so because they felt both parties benefited by learning a new perspective from their partner, thereby causing individual growth. Those who reported their differences as negative said that it was because it caused conflict in the relationship and did not report a perception of individual growth on the topic.

Extant research has also touched on attitudes and whether similar or complementary attitudes would correlate more with relationship closeness. One study found that when asking couples to rate their attitudes about controversial issues, such as abortion, they found that couples who reported dissimilar attitudes about the topic also reported higher levels of closeness. The authors argued that having dissimilar attitudes on controversial topics could facilitate conversation and thereby heighten emotional experiences they have with each other (Duyssen & Teske, 1993).

Other research has found additional benefits concerning dissimilarity in relationships. Tesser et al. (1998) found that couples who were forced to write essays about similarities they have with their partners used more "we" and "us" words; in contrast, those who were forced to write about their uniqueness used more "I" and "me" words. However, the second part of the research focused on which group (i.e., similar versus unique) would be less defensive

when told that their partner outperformed them on a novel task. They found individuals who had to report uniqueness in their relationship showed less defensiveness than did participants who had to report similarities in their relationship (Tesser et al., 1998). It is possible this result occurred because unique couples see that they have complementary skills (i.e., while one is weak in something, the other is strong), so when told that their partner outperformed them, their ego is not threatened. In contrast, those who see themselves as having similarities (i.e., sharing strength) could view being outperformed as a threat to the ego and make the outdone partner feel inadequate.

Finally, researchers have found that whereas similarity is important in such issues as religion, complementary needs keep couples together, especially if those individuals have traditional gender roles (Winch, 1954). More recently, others have studied the phenomenon in which gender roles and complementary needs are associated. Kroska (2004) found that when men and women do housework, they display gender: women do a greater amount of feminine jobs (i.e., grocery shopping, cooking, washing dishes, housecleaning, and laundry), whereas males do a greater amount of masculine jobs (i.e., auto maintenance and outdoor chores). Kroska also found that when a wife's job status exceeded that of her husband, the husband would do fewer feminine jobs at home. The author offered an explanation based on the idea of "deviance neutralization" (Atkinson & Boles, 1984). In short, the husband feels he is living a "deviant identity" (having a lesser job than the woman), so he tries to avoid further gender-atypical roles, thus highlighting his masculinity and difference between himself and his partner.

In short, it is possible that couples' similarities and differences can coexist and actually strengthen the couples' bond. Hypothesis 1 is that individuals will be attracted to a partner who is complementary in life skills. A good example of couples' use of each others' complementary skills is the phenomenon of "transactive memory" (Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991). This is when couples will rely on the abilities of their partner to remember things for which that individual has strength. For example, if an individual

has a weakness in remembering travel directions, but his or her close partner possesses this ability as a strength, then the individual will rely on the partner's memory and not his or her own (Wegner et al., 1991).

The second aspect of this study is to determine what would cause individuals to improve on a weakness they have in a life skill, such as money management. Baxter and West (2003) found that having dissimilar aspects of a relationship can be perceived positively if the individuals are willing to grow from their partner's differences. In addition to a growth orientation, another construct that might predict the motivation to improve on a weakness is Type A personality. Spence, Helmreich, and Pred (1987) found that achievement strivings of individuals with a Type A personality could be measured using the revised student version of the Jenkins Activity Scale. The original scale was used to measure the achievement strivings of academic psychologists by correlating it to the number of publications those individuals had. It was found that those with a high level of achievement striving also scored high on having a Type A personality. Those who were high in both tended to have a greater amount of publications. This type of individual could also want high achievement in his or her romantic relationship by demonstrating an increase in skill level to those life skills originally rated as a weakness.

Thus, Hypothesis 2 is twofold: a) individuals will be more willing to improve their life skills if they are growth oriented; and b) individuals will be more willing to improve their life skills if they have a Type A personality.

The third aspect of the study relies on what Ickes (2001) termed "empathic inference." This is the "everyday mind reading" that one must employ to have a more accurate perception of his or her partners' feelings. Wilhelm and Perrez (2004) performed a study in which individuals had to report six times a day in a journal what they thought their absent partner was feeling. They found that individuals are very accurate at judging this. They also found that participants were accurate in judging where the absent partner was and who they were with. If partners are high in empathic inference, they

should also be receptive to the wants and needs of their partner, including a partner's acceptance (or lack thereof) of their own life skills. Thus, the third aspect of this study is to investigate individuals' perceptions of their partners' desires. Individuals should be motivated to change when they perceive their partners are not satisfied with their current skill levels, as one way of maintaining their partner's relationship satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is that individuals will be willing to improve their weak skills if they believe that their partner perceives those weaknesses as negative.

Finally, it is likely that improvement in life skills will be associated with relationship duration. Couples will need time to learn each others' skills, learn each other's desires regarding improvement in those skills, and actually engage in improvement behaviors. In addition, if motivation to improve one's life skills is based on the perception that this improvement will please one's partner, improvement should also be associated with relationship satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is that improvement in life skills will be positively correlated with both relationship duration and relationship satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Adult participants available from the PSYC 101 General Psychology participant pool at a mid-sized Northwestern public university were asked to volunteer for this research project. Before analysis, six participants were removed after admitting dishonesty in their responses during debriefing. The final sample included 155 participants: 70 males, 81 females, and 4 unknowns. There was a mean age of 21.07 ( $SD = 3.9$ ), and participants were 81.8% White, 7.4% Asian, 6.1% Hispanic, 2.0% Black, and 9.7% other or unknown. Participation was restricted to individuals who were currently in a romantic relationship; there were 59.0% who reported "dating exclusively," 11.8% "married," 11.1% "dating casually," 8.3% "engaged," 5.6% "living together," and 4.2% "other." The mean duration of the relationship was 26.23 months,



( $SD=34.07$ ). The shortest duration was 1 month and the longest duration was 311 months.

## Measures

**Life skills.** There were several measures used to study the three hypotheses. First was a composite list of "life skills;" this list originated from the National Survey of Families and Households (Kroska, 2004) and was expanded for the present research. Participants rated themselves on a scale of 0 to 7 (where 0 = *extreme weakness* and 7 = *extreme strength*). Sample items include: "Remembering to pay bills" and "Solving conflicts with friends." They were then asked to rate how much they think their partner wants them to improve on these skills, using a scale of 0 to 7 (where 0 = *wants no improvement* and 7 = *wants much improvement*). All participants completed this scale twice; first, they were asked to complete the items based on their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the relationship, and second, they were asked to complete the items based on current strengths and weaknesses.

**Type A personality.** Participants were then asked to complete the Jenkins Activity Scale, which has been modified to fit college students (Spence et al., 1987), for themselves and for their partner to ascertain if the participant or the participant's partner has a Type A personality. The Jenkins Activity Scale includes 12 items and participants are asked to rate each item on 5-point scales (anchors change for each item). Sample items include: "Compared with other students, the amount of effort I put forth is?" and "How seriously do you take your work?" The internal reliability for this scale was good ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

**Growth orientation.** Individuals were then asked to complete the Self Expansion Questionnaire (Lewandowski, 2005) for themselves and for their partner to measure growth orientation. The Self Expansion Questionnaire includes 14 items; participants are asked to rate each item on a 7-point scale (where 1 = *not very much* and 7 = *very much*). Sample items include: "How much does your partner increase your ability to accomplish new things?" and "How much do you think your partner's strengths as a person (skills, abilities, etc.)

compensate for your own weaknesses as a person?" Internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using the satisfaction portion of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). This scale includes five questions assessing the individual's general satisfaction with his/her relationship (e.g., "My relationship is close to ideal"). Participants respond to each statement on a 9-point scale (where 0 = *do not agree at all* and 8 = *agree completely*). Internal consistency was very good ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Finally, a general demographics scale was administered.

## Results

### Hypothesis 1

To analyze the first hypothesis, a paired *t*-test was conducted to compare the number of similar versus complementary life skills between partners at the beginning of the relationship. In order to do this, for each participant and for each life skill, the partner's score on that life skill was subtracted from the participant's score on the same life skill. Any difference scores between zero and two were coded as similarities (i.e., scores were within three points of each other), and any difference scores between three and six were coded as complementary skills. For example, if the participant rated him or herself as a 2 on "remembering to pay bills," and his or her partner as a 6, the difference is  $6-2 = 4$ , which would be coded as complementary. Support for the hypothesis would be found if, at the beginning of the relationship, participants reported having more complementary life skills than similar life skills.

There was not a significant difference between the number of reported similarities ( $M = 19.50$ ,  $SD = 7.11$ ) and complementary life skills ( $M = 18.50$ ,  $SD = 7.11$ ) in the beginning of the relationships,  $t(153) = 0.379$ , *n.s.*

### Hypothesis 2

To analyze the second hypothesis, the participants' current skill levels were subtracted from their beginning skill level scores. This resulted in either a positive number, meaning "improvement," a

zero number, meaning "no change," or a negative number, meaning "decrease." Each individual's score was then coded as either improvement or no improvement (including no change). The mean number of improvements was 13.99 ( $SD = 7.14$ ), and mean number of no improvement was 24.01 ( $SD = 7.14$ ).

Pearson's correlations were then performed to evaluate how an individual's improvement score (i.e., number of improvements for that individual) was correlated with his or her Jenkins Activity score and his or her Self Expansion (growth) score. There was not a significant relationship between the individual's improvement score and Jenkins Activity score,  $r(153) = 0.07$ , n.s. There was also not a significant relationship between the individual's improvement score and Self Expansion (growth) score,  $r(153) = 0.03$ , n.s.

### Hypothesis 3

To analyze the third hypothesis, two Pearson's correlations were performed. The average number of perceived partner's want of improvement was correlated with the individual's actual improvement score. There was not a significant relationship,  $r(152) = -0.02$ , n.s. Additionally, a Pearson's correlation was performed between the perceived estimation of partner's not wanting improvement and the individual's improvement score; this was also not significant,  $r(148) = -0.09$ , n.s.

### Hypothesis 4

To analyze the fourth hypothesis, two Pearson's correlations were performed. The level of improvement in life skills was significantly positively correlated with relationship duration,  $r(153) = .19$ ,  $p = .02$ . Additionally, improvement in life skills was also significantly positively related to relationship satisfaction,  $r(153) = .20$ ,  $p = .01$ . Therefore, both aspects of Hypothesis 4 were supported.

## Discussion

The value of relationship research is to be able to identify why we make the choices we do. They are so unique, that a battery of literature has been produced solely on the debate that exists between

similar versus complementary characteristics. The dynamic between two couple members is rich in complexity when discussing similarities and differences in life skills. The current research asked individuals to reflect on their own past and their own present strengths and weakness in life skills and to report if their partner shares those same strengths and weaknesses. The goal was to identify if individuals report higher levels of similarities or complementary life skills with their romantic partner, and what would motivate individuals to improve their life skill weaknesses. Potential moderators explored were growth orientation, Type A personality, perception of partners' want of improvement, relationship duration, and relationship satisfaction. Only the last two variables were significantly associated with improvement in life skills.

Growth orientation was expected to motivate individuals to improve because the couple members would view the opportunity to change or expand themselves as a positive, therefore be willing to learn a new skill or improve on a weakness if the partner is strong in that particular skill. Type A personality was also expected to motivate individuals because Type A individuals usually have a strong drive to achieve, as seen with the Jenkins Activity scale. Finally, the perception of partners' want of improvement was expected to impact the improvement scores of individuals because the couple members weak in an area would want to please their partner by improving on it if they perceived the partner wanted them to. Surprisingly, these ideas were not supported by the results.

Whereas a plethora of literature exists supporting both sides of the similarity versus complementarity argument, this study was unable to replicate those findings. Indeed, the results of Hypothesis 1 showed at the beginning of the relationship partners did not have a majority of complementary skills, but they did also not have the majority of similar skills (thus, *neither* side of debate was validated). We speculate that whereas this survey addressed many variables, it is possible that only superficial (yet detailed) questions were presented to the participants. Perhaps a deeper look into the participants' feelings about the differences or similarities shared with their partner would shed more light onto the topic and

offer a more accurate description of the couples's point of view.

The current research has opened many doors to explore. In science, truth is relative. The world is not understood by what it is; rather, it is understood by what it is not. This research focused on specific areas that could possibly motivate a couple members to improve on a weakness in a life skill. The results indicated that of the variables measured in this study, relationship duration and relationship satisfaction are both associated with life skill improvement. This is useful information. However, because of the correlational nature of this research, causal relationships are unknown – does satisfaction in a relationship cause one to be more motivated to improve? Or, alternatively, does the perception of improvement in one's current partner cause an increase in satisfaction? Either direction is possible; future research should explore this question via longitudinal or experimental research designs.

However, it was surprising that the other variables measured were not associated with improvement. This may simply mean that there are other variables not yet explored that have an impact on the couple members' willingness or want to improve on a weakness. Perhaps questions of stability should have been asked. If couple members perceive that the relationship is stable, and not going to end, then there may be more motivation to improve. However, if couple members perceived that the relationship has the possibility of ending, the motivation to change will be greatly reduced, and certainly will not be affected by the current partner's desires (i.e., why change for this particular person if this relationship will end soon?).

For Hypothesis 1 the data showed that there is not a significant difference between the numbers of complementary skills in the beginning of the relationship as compared to the number of similar skills. One limitation of the survey could be its length. Perhaps individuals were overwhelmed by the amount of questioning and the detail; future research may wish to shorten the life skills list. Perhaps instead of asking five specific life skills about finances, for example, just one global life skill could be listed such as, "Responsible with money." Hypothesis 2 was also not supported. The

correlation was in the predicted direction, but was not significant. Again, perhaps more pointed questioning would generate clarity to the participants, allowing for greater self reflection when thinking about their skills levels now as in relation to the past. Finally, Hypothesis 3 was also not supported. In fact, the correlations actually went in the opposite direction. It was predicted that individuals would be more likely to improve a weakness if they perceived their partner wanted them to. However, it was found that individuals would actually become weaker in that particular life skill if they perceived their partners wanted them to improve (although this association was not significant). Likewise, if individuals perceived their partners did not want them to improve, then they would report an improvement (again, this was not significant).

As stated earlier, Buss (1984) found that one's life partner is the most influential person in one's life. This poses a serious question about the dynamics of an individual's relationship with this highly important other person. Is it good for one's significant other to be complementary, and, if so, in which ways? Questions of this nature need to be researched. Why do individuals choose the partners they do? Do they choose based on whether the partner is different, thereby leading individuals to expand on their own beliefs through discussions with someone who disagrees, or from learning from a partner's skills? Or, do they seek to find someone who is similar, thereby affirming beliefs when having conversations that are similar in nature, and creating a life together which does not require skills on which both partners have a weakness?

The benefit to this research is that it brings us one step further to understanding the dynamics between two couple members who have similar and/or complementary life skills. The study found an objective way to numerically evaluate similarities and differences in romantic relationships. It is easy to "feel" like one has a lot of differences or similarities compared to his or her partner. The goal of this survey was to make individuals "show" how much they differ from their partners. Perhaps this idea would resonate more clearly if the participants were simply asked to list the ways in which they are



similar or complementary when compared to their partner. Additionally, participants could be asked stability questions such as, "If you were to not improve on this weakness, how likely do you think it would be for your relationship to end?"

This study has defined what does not have an effect on motivation to improve on a weakness, and two constructs that do (relationship duration and satisfaction). This will narrow the search for additional relationship variables which have an impact on the motivation to improve one's life skills. This survey has generated new possibilities to explore and will contribute to a greater understanding of the complexities surrounding romantic relationships.

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